

**TESTIMONY OF KAREN SENICH
BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
*H.B. No. 7027 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM
ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH 2019, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.***

February 21, 2017

I am Karen Senich and I am the Executive Director of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury. We are a part of the Connecticut Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs. The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury ("Club") has been providing safe, after school programs for Greater Waterbury's children and teens for over 129 years. The Connecticut Clubs, combined, serve over 100,000 young people in 35 municipalities; Waterbury is a part of that strong network serving over 700 of Waterbury's young people. On behalf of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury, our members and their families, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express my opposition to H.B. No. 7027 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH 2019, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

I am compelled to testify to oppose the proposed reduction and consolidation of Neighborhood Youth Center funding into a pool of funds (Student Support Services) designed to serve far too divergent population groups and needs. The needs of our youth are much too great to minimize them by rolling them all into one group and offering much less assistance to them. I support the continued funding of the Boys & Girls Clubs in Connecticut through the Neighborhood Youth Center grants, administered by the Department of Education. These funds represent just 5% of Waterbury's annual budget but the State's steadfast support of the Boys & Girls Clubs' work with young people throughout Connecticut provides critical leverage for non-governmental support.

Begun in fiscal year 1994-95, the Neighborhood Youth Center Program was designed to provide positive experiences for at-risk youth. As intended, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Connecticut, including Waterbury, provide athletic and recreational activities; academic and enrichment programs, including tutoring and mentoring; and other preventative and intervention services for youth and their families. The Clubs provide positive reinforcement and guidance through outcome focused programing stemming the problems facing today's youth. By providing a wide range of educational and recreational opportunities, a safe environment, and supportive relationships, the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury helps young people who need it most discover their interests, have a positive outlook for their future, and be confident, successful stewards of their communities. Our programs positively impact the lives of those we serve and are based upon evidence-based best practices in youth development. Our youth members are supported and encouraged by our staff.

The Boys & Girls Club believes that there are five key elements to positive youth development: a safe, positive environment; fun; supportive relationships; opportunities and expectations; and recognition. Our programs are designed to incorporate those elements into everything we do –

the outcomes being that Club members have higher academic achievement; are more likely to abstain from high-risk behaviors; are more likely to serve their community; and are more likely to engage in regular physical activity. (National Youth Outcomes Initiative, 2014 Outcomes Report, BGCA) A study conducted through a partnership among the Connecticut Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs, the Connecticut Department of Education and the Charter Oak Group found that Boys & Girls Club members had lower rates of chronic absenteeism, suspensions and expulsions. (2013-2014)

Participation in the Boys & Girls Clubs' educational programs result in academic proficiency at each grade level and graduation from high school, the ability to make informed decisions about post-secondary education and the development of a lifelong learner. The programs reinforce and enhance the skills and knowledge learned at school. Students do much better in school when they spend their non-school hours engaged in fun, but academically beneficial, activities. School-age youth need additional academic support during after-school hours. Particularly in minority communities, youth are failing to learn basic skills (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics) during the school day. Moreover, the lack of affordable, educationally beneficial after-school opportunities for many youth, especially those in low-income urban communities, is a decisive factor in explaining the nation's widening achievement gap. (BGCA) BGCA research indicates that after-school programs not only keep children safe and out of trouble but also significantly improve academic achievement. Youth attending formal after-school programs spend more time in academic activities and enrichment opportunities than do their peers left unsupervised after school. Young people who spend 25-35 hours per week engaged in constructive learning activities during their out-of-school time show better achievement in reading, mathematics and other subjects than their peers.

The funding provided by the State allows the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Waterbury to maintain the cost of the annual membership at seventy-five (\$75.00) dollars; members may come as many days per week throughout the school year and participate in whatever programs they choose. Eighty seven (87%) percent of Waterbury's members qualify for free or reduced cost lunch; far exceeding the state average. Additionally, the after-school program is very affordable, especially for those parents who are considered ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). Eighty (80%) percent of our families are considered to be ALICE families. The \$75/year after-school membership is far lower than the average cost of child care, allowing these parents to use their limited resources on other household necessities. The issue of income exceeding the Care4Kids limits becomes a non-issue for after-school. The membership fee is all inclusive; there are no additional costs for a child to participate in any after-school activities and every child receives snack daily.

Our Club members are considered "at risk". Despite living in an urban areas with the common symptoms of poverty, last year, 100% of our high school seniors graduated on time and continued on to a 4-year college. In a survey conducted in 2015, the following was found for Waterbury's members:

- 88% were on track for graduation
- 92% expected to complete high school & attend college
- 87% understood the importance of school

- 88% reported having missed 3 or less days from school

What does this data tell you? That the Boys & Girls Clubs, including Waterbury, actively support the mission of the Department of Education through programs that promote academic success. Ultimately, the positive results created by the environment and programing at the Club lead to more positive outcomes for our youth.

While we realize the significance of the budget deficit, we would respectfully suggest that the positive outcomes that the Boys & Girls Clubs produce justify the State's support. It is in the best interest of the young people and the greater Waterbury community that the Boys & Girls Club continues to provide a safe after-school environment. I strongly urge you to maintain the Neighborhood Youth Center funding through the Department of Education.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.